

criterion: How would this work in my classroom? They are dubious about whether I have anything to tell them about what would work in their classrooms. True, I taught school for eight years, but that was thirty years ago.

And because I teach education rather than English there is an aspect to our relationship that was not present in John Carter's relationship with me and my classmates. If John Carter rhapsodized over "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," I could go along and smile at his naivete in thinking that "a summer's day" would be greeted by anything but howls on Chicago's south side. But when I suggest to my hard-bitten students that poor children are not being as well educated as they could be, they are not amused. They take it as a personal attack from someone who has been living in an ivory tower for the last thirty years, and they resent it—a lot.

So my getting through to these students is a good deal more complicated than John Carter's getting through to me. Benign amusement is replaced by thinly veiled hostility. Unlike my self-consciously political students who sometimes disagree with me on ideological grounds, these hard-bitten school teachers take differences of opinion with me personally.

My hard-bitten teachers have taught me a lesson that I, like many academics, needed to learn: Don't be so damned superior! Don't look down your nose at people out there teaching real children in real and sometimes dreadful circumstances. Don't question their intelligence, or their commitment, or their motives. I hope I have learned this lesson well enough so that I don't set up barriers between them and me such that they are not able to listen to my story and consider my position.

And so I think I've thought it through, and I hope I've learned to deal with the realities of teaching and not to be too smug while assessing problems and suggesting solutions, because no matter what the solutions are, it's hard-bitten school teachers who will need to implement them.

## A DISTINCTLY UN-AMERICAN IDEA An Education Appropriate to Their Station

### Chapter 2

Jean Anyon studied fifth grade classes in five public elementary schools in rich neighborhoods and not-so-rich neighborhoods in northern New Jersey.<sup>1</sup> In one school, designated *executive elite*, family breadwinners were top corporate executives in multinational corporations or Wall Street financial firms. Their incomes were in the top 1 percent in the United States. In a second school, designated *affluent professional*, family breadwinners were doctors, TV and advertising executives, and other highly paid professionals. Incomes were in the top 10 percent for the nation. In a third school, designated *middle class*, breadwinners were a mixture of highly skilled, well-paid blue- and white-collar workers and those with traditional middle-class occupations such as teachers, social workers, accountants, and middle managers. Incomes were better than average for the United States but below the top 10 percent. In a fourth and fifth school designated *working class*, about one-third of the breadwinners were skilled blue-collar workers; about half were unskilled or semiskilled blue-collar workers; and about 15 percent of the heads of households were unemployed.

First Anyon noted similarities among the schools. They were nearly all white. They were all located in northern New Jersey and subject to the same state requirements. They all used the same

arithmetic books. They had the same language arts course of study. Two of the schools used the same basal reading series. There were startling differences, however.

In the two working-class schools, most of the teachers were born in the same city as the school but lived in better sections. Most of them were young and had graduated from the local teachers college; many of them were single.

In the working-class schools, knowledge was presented as fragmented facts isolated from wider bodies of meaning and from the lives and experiences of the students. *Work* was following steps in a procedure. There was little decision making or choice. Teachers rarely explained why work was being assigned or how it was connected to other assignments. Work was often evaluated in terms of whether the steps were followed rather than whether it was right or wrong. For example, one teacher led the students through a series of steps to draw a one-inch grid on their paper without telling them what they were making or what it was for. When a girl realized what they were making and said she had a faster way to do it, the teacher answered, "No you don't. You don't even know what I'm making yet. Do it this way or it's wrong."

While the same arithmetic book was used in all five schools, the teacher in one working-class school commented that she skipped pages dealing with mathematical reasoning and inference because they were too hard. The teacher in the second working-class school said, "These pages are for creativity—they're extras." She often skipped them as well.

In one working-class school they used a social studies textbook that was described by its publisher as intended for "low ability students." The teachers guide referred repeatedly to "educationally deficient students"—for whom the book was intended. The book was intended to provide a year's work, but there were only sixteen lessons consisting of a few paragraphs followed by vocabulary drill and exercises to check recall. However, these were not special education classrooms. In the two working-class school classrooms combined, the children's average IQ was above 100 and eight children had IQs above 125.

In the working-class schools, social studies instruction typically consisted of copying teachers' notes, writing answers to textbook questions, and craft projects, such as cutting out and making a

stand-up figure of a cowboy roping a steer to represent the Southwest when studying U.S. geography. Compared to the more affluent schools in this study there was less discussion of controversial topics such as labor disputes, civil rights, and women's rights and less attention to the history of these issues.

In language arts, the teacher gave each student a duplicated sheet entitled "All About Me" and directed them to write their answers on the lines following questions such as "Where were you born?" and "What is your favorite animal?" This activity was referred to as "writing an autobiography." Children were presented with rules for where to put commas, but there was never any discussion of how commas made writing easier to understand or of the notion that punctuation called for decisions based on the intended meaning.

In science, children were routinely told to copy the directions for doing an experiment from the book. The teacher then did the experiment in front of the class as the students watched and wrote a list entitled "What We Found" on the board. The students copied it into their notebooks. A test on "What We Found" would follow.

Teachers made every effort to control students' movement. They often kept children after the dismissal bell to finish their work or to punish them for misbehavior. There were no clocks in classrooms. Materials were handed out by the teacher and closely guarded. Students were ordered to remain in their seats unless given specific permission to move. When permitted to leave the room they needed a pass with the time and date.

Teachers made derogatory remarks regarding the students. A principal was reported to have said to a new teacher "Just do your best. If they learn to add and subtract, that's a bonus. If not, don't worry about it." A second grade teacher said the children were "getting dumber every year." Only twice did Anyon hear a teacher say "please" to a student in an unsarcastic tone. She heard "Shut up" frequently.

One fifth grade teacher said the students needed the basics—simple skills. When asked "why?" she responded, "They're lazy. I hate to categorize them, but they're lazy." Another fifth grade teacher who was asked why she had students endlessly copy notes from the blackboard in social studies replied, "Because the children in this school don't know anything about the U.S., so you can't teach them

much." Another teacher said, "You can't teach these kids anything. Their parents don't care about them, and they're not interested." Another teacher answered when asked what was important knowledge for her students, "Well, we keep them busy." You have to keep reminding yourself that these children did not have low IQ scores. They were working-class children with average intelligence, some with better than average intelligence.

When Anyon asked these fifth grade students, "What do you think of when I say the word *knowledge*?" not a single child used the word *think*. Only one mentioned the word *mind*. When asked if they can make knowledge only one said yes.

In each category of school, Anyon observed what she called a "dominant theme." In the working-class schools the dominant theme was ~~resistance~~. Students vandalized school property and resisted the teachers' efforts to teach. Boys fell out of chairs; students brought bugs into the classroom and released them; children lost books or forgot them; students interrupted the teacher. They showed no enthusiasm for projects into which the teacher put extra effort. They refused to answer questions and were apparently pleased when the teacher became upset. There was less resistance to easy work, and so assignments were rarely demanding.

*rich came* According to Anyon these children were developing a relationship to the economy, authority, and work that is appropriate preparation for wage labor—labor that is mechanical and routine. Their capacity for creativity and planning was ignored or denied. Their response was very much like that of adults in their community to work that is mechanical and routine and that denies their capacity for creativity and planning. They engaged in relentless "slowdowns," subtle sabotage, and other modes of indirect resistance similar to that carried out by disgruntled workers in factories, sales floors, and offices.

In the middle-class school, about one-third of the teachers grew up in the neighborhood of the school. Most graduated from the local state teachers college, and many of them lived in the neighborhood of the school. Some were married to other teachers, accountants, police officers, nurses, and managers of local businesses.

Teachers in the middle-class school seemed to believe that their job was to teach the knowledge found in textbooks or dictated by

curriculum experts. They valued this more than knowledge taught by experience. For example, when a child said that the plural of mouse is not *mouses* because "it wouldn't sound right," the teacher said that was the wrong reason. The right reason was that *mouse* is an irregular noun, as it says in the book.

A social studies textbook intended for use in sixth grade was used in the fifth grade classroom in the middle-class school. According to the publisher, the purpose of the book was to introduce fundamental concepts. There were "understandings" from anthropology, economics, history, geography, or political science listed in the teacher's guide for each chapter.

Social studies classes involved reading the text, listening to the teacher's explanations, answering the teacher's questions, and occasionally doing reports. There was rarely sustained inquiry into a topic. The teacher rarely used a feature of the text entitled "Using the Main Idea" (applying main ideas to current events and personal situations), because she said she had enough to do to get them to understand the generalizations.

Knowledge in the middle-class school was "more conceptual" than in the working-class school. It was less a matter of isolated facts and more a matter of gaining information and understanding from socially approved sources. Knowledge here was like that in the working-class school, however, in that it was not connected with the lives and experiences of the students.

In the middle-class school, work was getting the right answer. Answers were words, sentences, numbers, facts, and dates. You could not make them up. They were found in books or by listening to the teacher. You wrote them neatly on paper in the right order. If you got enough right answers, you got a good grade.

You got the right answer by following directions, but the directions allowed for some choice, some figuring, some decision making, and the teacher explained the purpose of assignments and why the directions would lead to the right answer. For example, students were permitted to do steps "in their heads" rather than write them down. They were allowed to do division problems the long or short way. When reviewing homework they had to say *how* they did the problem as well as give their answer. Social studies consisted of reading passages and answering comprehension questions: who, what, when, where, and sometimes why. However, questions that

might have led to controversial topics were avoided because parents might complain.

Work rarely called for creativity. There was little serious attention to how students might develop or express their own ideas. In a social studies project, the students were directed to find information on assigned topics and put it "in your own words." Many of the children's products had imaginative covers and illustrations, which were largely ignored by the teacher who graded on information, neatness, and the student's success in paraphrasing the sources used. Lessons that explicitly called for creativity and self-expression were "enrichment" and "for fun." They did not count toward grades.

The teachers in the middle-class school varied from strict to somewhat easygoing, but for all of them, decisions were made on the basis of rules and regulations that were known to the students. Teachers always honored class dismissal bells. There was little excitement in the school work, and assignments did not seem to take into account the student's interests or feelings, but the children seemed to believe that there were rewards: good grades lead to college and a good job. Remember, these were fifth graders.

When children in the middle-class school were asked what knowledge is, seventeen of twenty used words like *learn*, *remember*, *facts*, *study*, *smartness*, *intelligent*, *know*, *school*, *study*, and *brains*. When asked if they could make knowledge, nine said no and eleven said yes. When asked how, they said they'd look it up or listen and do what they're told or they'd go to the library.

The dominant theme in the middle-class school was possibility. There was widespread anxiety about tests and grades but there was a pervasive belief that hard work would pay off. These students viewed knowledge as a valuable possession that can be traded for good grades, a good college education, and a good job. There was more excited patriotism around holidays here than in any other school. There were frequent auditorium assemblies with a patriotic flavor. The feeling was that America is full of promise and these children were going to cash in on it.

Anyon observed that in the middle-class school the children were developing a relationship to the economy, authority, and work that is appropriate for white-collar working-class and middle-class jobs: paper work, technical work, sales, and social services in the private and public sectors. Such work does not call for creativity.

Such workers are not rewarded for critical analysis. They are rewarded for knowing the answers, for knowing where to find answers, for knowing which form, regulation, technique, or procedure is correct. While this kind of work does not reward creativity or self-expression, it usually pays enough to enable workers to find opportunities for creativity and self-expression outside the workplace.

In the affluent professional school the teachers came from elsewhere in the state. They all came from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. Most were women married to high-status professionals or executives.

Creativity and personal development were important goals for students at the affluent professional school. Teachers wanted students to think for themselves and to make sense of their own experience. Discovery and experience were important. In arithmetic, for example, students measured perimeters in the classroom and created questions for other students to answer. They collected data in surveys and did experiments with cubes and scales. They made a film on the metric system. In science, students experimented in *their own way* to discover the properties of aluminum, copper, and glass (which heats fastest, for example), and it didn't matter whether they got the right answer. What mattered was that they discussed their ideas. When students asked, "How should I do this?" teachers answered, "You decide," or, "What makes sense to you?"

There were, however, wrong answers. In arithmetic, six plus two was still eight and only eight. In science, the answer had to be consistent with observations. Students were required to have their observations and answers "verified" by other students before handing in assignments.

The social studies textbook emphasized "higher concepts" such as "the roles of savings, capital, trade, education, skilled labor, skilled managers, and cultural factors (religious beliefs, attitudes toward change) in the process of economic development," and the understanding that "the controlling ideas of Western culture come largely from two preceding cultures: The Judaic and Greco-Roman."

Students read and outlined the text and used it as a guide for "inquiry activities" such as baking clay cuneiform replicas, writing stories and plays and creating murals showing the division of labor

in ancient societies. Several students had seen the Tutankhamen exhibit in New York—one had seen it in Paris.

They devoted a lot of time to current events because, according to the teacher, "they're so opinionated anyway, and they love it." Children often wrote editorials and brought in clippings on such topics as labor strife, inflation, and nuclear power. The teacher, however, said she had to be very careful of expressing her own opinion. "One year I had the superintendent's son, the mayor's son, and the daughter of the president of the board of education in my room—all at one time. I *really* had to watch what I said."

Knowledge in the affluent professional school was viewed as being open to discovery. It was used to make sense and thus it had personal value. School knowledge was presented as having relevance to life's problems. Unlike the situation in the working-class and middle-class schools, social strife was acknowledged and discussed.

In the affluent professional school, work was creative activity carried out independently. It involved individual thought and appropriate methods and materials. Products were often stories, essays, or representations of ideas in murals, craft projects, and graphs. Students' projects were to show originality and individuality, but they had to fit with reality—that is, a creative mural could be marked down if it misrepresented the facts or concepts it was supposed to represent.

One assignment was for students to find the average number of chocolate chips in three chocolate chip cookies. The teacher announced gravely, "I'll give you three cookies, and you'll have to eat your way through, I'm afraid." When work was underway, she circulated giving help, praise, and reminders about getting too noisy. The children worked sitting or standing at their desks or at a bench in the back of the room or sitting on the floor.

In their study of ancient civilizations, they made a film on Egypt. One student wrote the script, the class acted it out, and one of the parents edited it. They read and wrote stories depicting ancient times. They did projects chosen from a list, all of which involved graphic representations such as murals. They wrote and exchanged letters with the other fifth grade in "hieroglyphics." The list goes on.

They discussed current events daily and were encouraged to expand on what they said and to be specific. The teacher's questions were designed to help them make connections between events in the news and what they were learning in school.

In language arts, they did not use textbooks because the principal thought textbooks hampered creativity. Each child interviewed a first grader and wrote a rebus story<sup>2</sup> just for that child. They wrote editorials about matters before the school board and radio plays that were sometimes acted over the school intercom. Lessons on punctuation stressed the relationship between meaning and punctuation.

Products of work were highly prized. The affluent professional school was the only school where Anyon was not allowed to take children's work away from the school. If possible, she could duplicate it and take the copy, but if it could not be copied, she could not have it.

Control involved constant negotiation. Teachers rarely gave direct orders unless the children were too noisy. Instead, teachers commented on the probable consequences of student behavior and asked students to decide accordingly. One of the few rules regulating children's movement was that not more than three children could be out of the room at one time. They could go to the school library at any time to get a book. They merely signed their name on the chalkboard and left the room when they needed to. There were no passes.

They sometimes negotiated what work was to be done. For example, children sometimes asked for more time before moving on to the next subject, and the teacher sometimes acquiesced. There is a remarkable footnote to this discussion. The teacher commented that she was "more structured" that year than usual because of the large number of children in the class who were considered discipline problems.

In the affluent professional school, work was not repetitious and mechanical, as it was in the working-class school; it was not knowing the correct answers, as it was in the middle-class school; it was being able to manipulate what Anyon termed symbolic capital.

The children in the affluent professional school had the least trouble answering the question "What is knowledge." Many of them used the word *think* and several alluded to personal activity having



to do with ideas. ("Figuring stuff out.") "You think up ideas and then find things wrong with those ideas.") When asked, "Can you make knowledge?" sixteen said yes; only four said no.

In the affluent professional school the dominant theme was individualism with a minor theme of humanitarianism. Emphasis in the classroom was on thinking for oneself, creativity, and discovery in science and arithmetic. But there was also a pervasive climate of mutual help and concern for one another and for humanity. The principal ended morning announcements with "Do something nice for someone today." Social class and class conflict were discussed in social studies, with a liberal spin. There was an entire textbook devoted to prejudice and discrimination. Eight of twenty students interviewed expressed antagonism toward "the rich," who they said were greedy, spoiled, and snobby. This is interesting in light of the fact that these students' family incomes were in the top 10 percent for the nation.

Children in this school were developing a relationship to the economy, authority, and work that is appropriate for artists, intellectuals, legal and scientific experts, and other professionals whose work is creative, intrinsically satisfying for most people, and rewarded with social power and high salaries. Although in the workplace they do not have complete control over which ideas they develop and express, affluent professionals are relatively autonomous. Their relationship to people who decide which ideas will be developed (the executive elite whom I'll get to in the next paragraph) involves substantial negotiation.

In the executive elite school, as in the affluent professional school, the teachers were women married to high-status professionals and business executives, but in the executive elite school the teachers regarded their students as having higher social status than themselves.

Knowledge in the executive elite school was academic, intellectual, and rigorous. More was taught and more difficult concepts were taught. Reasoning and problem solving were important. The rationality and logic of mathematics were held up as the model for correct and ethical thinking.

Social studies knowledge was more sophisticated, complex, and analytic than in the other schools. Questions such as good and bad effects of imperialism and the reasons for conflict between social classes were discussed. However, there was little questioning of the status quo. The present distribution of wealth and power was presented as natural and timeless—going back to the ancient Greeks. Children were required to plan lessons and teach them to the class. Among other things, they were evaluated on how well they kept control of the class. The teacher said to one child who lost control of his classmates, "When you're up there, you have authority, and you have to use it. I'll back you up."

While strict attention was demanded during lessons, there was little attempt to regulate the children's movement at other times. They were allowed into the classrooms when they arrived at school; they did not have to wait for the bell, as in every other school in Anyon's study.

Students were permitted to take materials from closets and even from the teacher's desk when they needed them. They were in charge of the school office at lunch time. They did not need permission or a pass to leave the room. Because of the amount of work demanded, however, they rarely left the room.

The children were sometimes flippant, boisterous, and occasionally rude. However, they were usually brought into line by reminding them of their responsibility to achieve. "It's up to you." Teachers were polite to students. There was no sarcasm, no nasty remarks, and few direct orders.

When asked, "Can you make knowledge?" half the children in the executive elite school said yes; half said no. Compared with the affluent professional school children, these children took a more passive view toward the creation of knowledge. For many of them knowledge comes from tradition. It's "out there" and you are expected to learn it.

The dominant theme in the executive elite school was excellence—preparation for being the best, for top-quality performance. There was no narcissistic coddling here, but insistence upon self-discipline instead. The pace was brisker than in any other school and children were often told that they alone were responsible for keeping up.

In the executive elite school the children were developing a relationship to the economy, authority, and work that is different from all the other schools. They learned grammatical, mathematical, and other vocabularies by which systems are described. They were taught to use these vocabularies to analyze and control situations. The point of school work was to achieve, to excel, to prepare for life at the top.

The working-class children were learning to follow directions and do mechanical, low-paying work, but at the same time they were learning to resist authority in ways sanctioned by their community. The middle-class children were learning to follow orders and do the mental work that keeps society producing and running smoothly. They were learning that if they cooperated they would have the rewards that well-paid, middle-class work makes possible outside the workplace. The affluent professional children were learning to create products and art, "symbolic capital," and at the same time they were learning to find rewards in work itself and to negotiate from a powerful position with those (the executive elite) who make the final decisions on how real capital is allocated. The executive elite children? They were learning to be masters of the universe.

Anyon's study supports the findings of earlier observers<sup>3</sup> that in American schools children of managers and owners are rewarded for initiative and assertiveness, while children of the working-class are rewarded for docility and obedience and punished for initiative and assertiveness. Remember the teacher who said, "Do it this way or it's wrong."

This couldn't be more obvious when you compare Anyon's "gentry" schools—her executive elite and affluent professional schools—with her working-class schools. The surprising thing is where Anyon's middle-class school fits into this picture. Like the children in working-class schools, children in the middle-class school were schooled to take orders. They were taught that knowledge in textbooks was more valuable than their own experience. They were taught through traditional, directive methods to look up knowledge, not to create it. They were not taught to manipulate or direct systems, nor was there any effort to connect school knowledge with their daily lives.

On the other hand, Anyon's middle-class school was like her gentry schools in that students saw the knowledge that teachers had to offer as valuable—albeit for the future, for entrance into good colleges, and for procuring highly paid work. And since they valued the teachers' knowledge, they cooperated with the teachers to get it. The theme here was not resistance, as it was in the working-class school; it was possibility.

Twenty years after Anyon's study Robert Reich,<sup>4</sup> Clinton's first secretary of labor, analyzed America's workforce in the 90s. While Anyon classified Americans in terms of their incomes and the kind of work they do, Reich's analysis added a new criterion on which to classify workers: with whom do they compete for jobs—only other Americans, or with workers in other countries?

Reich identified the top 20 percent as "symbolic analysts." These are the problem solvers and creators of ideas and symbols. They are engineers, bankers, lawyers, writers, designers, and the fastest-growing category—consultants. Theirs is an international job market. The work done by an engineer in Chicago today might go to an engineer in Tokyo or Bonn tomorrow. The same is true of bankers, lawyers, writers, designers, and consultants. Americans educated in our best schools (those Anyon described as executive elite and affluent professional) perform very well in this international competition, and they command enormous salaries.

Reich classifies what I shall refer to as the working class (the bottom 55 percent of American workers) in two ways. He refers to "in-person service workers" and "routine production service workers." In-person service workers are in retail sales, hospital and health care, food services and security. Since these services are delivered to the consumer "in-person," these jobs cannot be easily exported. In-person service work is often characterized as nurturing work or women's work. It has always been and continues to be poorly paid. In-person service jobs make up a little more than half of the working-class jobs in America today.

Slightly less than half of the working class in America today are in "routine production service work." These are the foot soldiers of American industry—assembly line workers in the older "heavy" industries and in the newer electronics industries. These jobs are eminently exportable. While work in newer industries is cleaner and easier, shops are not unionized and the pay is remarkably

lower. The number of well-paid jobs in older industries is declining while the number of poorly paid jobs in newer industries is increasing.

What's left is the approximately 20 percent whom I shall refer to as the middle class. Reich refers them to as government workers. These are the teachers, local and federal government employees, and, surprisingly, physicians paid through Medicaid and Medicare.

In the past twenty years numbers have grown at the top and bottom. The number in the middle has declined. Those at the top have gotten a whole lot richer. Those in the middle are in about the same place economically, and those at the bottom have gotten a whole lot poorer. Reich observed that among the fastest-growing occupations in America is that of security guard. Small wonder.

The question is, do the children of the elite and the middle class and the working class still attend schools like those Anyon described. The answer is, you bet! If there were later studies that did not support her findings or that showed a trend in a different direction, I would never have cited her in the first place. But the recent literature supports her conclusions.

In the early 90s, the faculty at California State University at Dominguez Hills (near Los Angeles) described schools attended by children who are disenfranchised because of social class, poverty, or cultural background in much the same way Anyon described the working-class schools in her study a decade earlier.<sup>5</sup> A colleague of mine regularly sends her students out to schools and asks them to compare what they observe to what Anyon observed. They invariably report that matters remain the same. In *Savage Inequalities*<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Kozol reports on schools in upscale communities like Winnetka, Illinois, Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and Rye, New York, and schools in impoverished communities like East St. Louis, Illinois, Camden, New Jersey, and parts of Washington, D.C., Chicago, and New York City. Nothing's changed, unless, perhaps, it's gotten worse.

In February 1998 I asked one of my classes to write papers comparing Anyon's findings to their own personal experiences. The following are excerpts from two of their papers.

I am from Amherst, New Hampshire. Amherst is one of the most affluent places to live in New Hampshire. About five years

ago a high school was built entirely for Amherst families. Amherst originally was sharing a high school with a neighboring middle class town that was not as wealthy. Many parents and families in Amherst wanted a better education for their children, so as a result, a brand new high school was built. The high school was a major development in the town of Amherst, and people from other towns were moving to Amherst, just so their children could go to the high school. I would consider Amherst High School to fit into the affluent professional category. The methods of teaching almost duplicated the strategy taught at the affluent professional school in Anyon's study.

I did not attend the high school, because I went to a private school, but many of my close friends did and my younger sister does now. I was told the students were given extreme privileges and were taught knowledge in creative ways, rather than straight from a textbook. For example, students had their own smoking section, they called their teachers by their first name, there were no honor level classes, and a lot of material taught (from science to English) was done through projects involving the kids to the greatest extent. The students were also able to get away with a lot, because they questioned everything that was assigned to them. Parents were relentless in their persistence to have their kids receive the best education possible.

However, the town Amherst broke away from was left with mostly middle class students, because all the Amherst kids left. As a result, the high school resorted to more traditional styles of educating, which meant teaching straight from a textbook and not giving any choices or freedom to the students. Meanwhile, the Amherst students were receiving progressive styles of teaching and were being educated on how to become superior professionals.<sup>7</sup>

[At first] Anyon's conclusions seemed wildly radical and oversimplified to me. I was not willing to admit that limits so tangible and so obvious existed in classrooms in the United States. After all, America is supposedly the "land of opportunity" where you can achieve whatever career goals to which you aspire. This class culture distinction sounded as severe as the caste system in India. However, the more I remembered various teaching situations I have been in, the more clear class culture perpetuation became.



As a student teacher, I had the opportunity to teach in what Anyon would classify an affluent professional school and a working-class school. Although both schools professed progressive principles, the differences in the two schools were very apparent at the time. However, I never considered how the methods used to teach differed until reading Anyon's study. I find the correlations between my real life experiences and the study frightening. Reading about this type of class tracking in schools is one thing. Realizing that you have experienced it is truly another.

My experience in the affluent professional school was idyllic. The classes I worked with had many activities promoting independence and creativity such as Reading and Writing Workshops. Students had control of how to use their time, and all teacher directed lessons were mini-lessons taking no more than ten minutes of class time. These lessons were often based on questions that students had encountered during their individual reading or writing activities. Students could sit anywhere they pleased in the room, as long as they were working on their projects. All books read and all writing genres exhibited by the students were self-chosen. These conditions mirror Anyon's description of the affluent professional school.

Progressive principles were highly prized, and at each staff meeting, the principal began with the statement, "We are here to consider how we can best serve the whole child in each of our students." Staff went out of their way to interact with students individually in and out of class. All the teachers and administrators lived in the school district or in adjacent upper class suburbs and most had attended private colleges for their teacher training. It was inspiring. This was how all of my education professors had told me our classes should run. The students flourished. Parents praised the program on Parents' night. They valued their children's creative efforts.

My next assignment contrasted sharply with the first. Before I began in the classroom my sponsor teacher told me that students at the school were not interested in learning, and were often out of control. She showed me lessons, complete with overheads she had designed instructing students on the proper steps to take if they felt they needed to leave the classroom. Everything was outlined in detail. The desks were always in rows. According to my sponsor teacher, the students "couldn't handle" working in groups.

The most effective way to have students take notes, my grade team told me one day, was to give them Xeroxed copies of the teacher's outline notes with some key words missing. This could have been the school Anyon observed in her study. The control and the bitterness directed at students were shocking.

The teachers in the working-class school lived within the community. In the time I was there, I met four teachers from two grade teams of six each who had graduated from this same school. Almost everyone had attended a state school for their teaching certification. While the affluent professional school's teachers were excited and motivated, the most common refrain I heard among the working-class school's teachers was that they planned early retirement.

The dichotomy still amazes me.<sup>8</sup>

And so I ask, "Those who are smartest and work hardest go furthest?" Who's kidding whom? When students begin school in such different systems, the odds are set for them. President Kennedy once said that he hoped that a person's chance to become president was not determined on the day he was baptized (referring to the fact that some said a Catholic could never become president). I'd like to hope that a child's expectations are not determined on the day she or he enters kindergarten, but it would be foolish to entertain such a hope unless there are some drastic changes made.

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### Chapter 3

## HARSH SCHOOLS, BIG BOYS, AND THE PROGRESSIVE SOLUTION

Daniel Resnick<sup>1</sup> tells an interesting story about the history of American schools and how we got to where we are today. His story begins with the history of the catechism. If you didn't go to a parochial school or attend Sunday school, you might not know what a catechism is. It's a book that teaches religious doctrine in a question-answer format. I still remember the first catechism lessons I memorized, I think in first grade.

Who made you?

*God made me.*

Why did God make you?

*God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this life and to be happy with Him forever in the next.<sup>2</sup>*

Through memorizing page after page of such questions and answers I was taught those doctrines of the Catholic church that were deemed appropriate for children my age.

Catechisms appeared in the earliest days of Christianity and continued to be produced throughout the middle ages. Even after the Reformation the catechism continued to be a favored way of teaching religious doctrine. Luther's *Little Catechism* was translated into all the major European languages within a generation.

Similar books and methods were used in the first schools in Europe and in colonial America. *The New England Primer* with its hundred plus questions and answers was the most widely used reader in American schools before 1820. It sold more than two million copies in its many editions. Other school books followed suit, such as *A Political Catechism, Intended for Use in Schools in the United States of America*, which was published in 1796.

Early schools did not permit, let alone encourage, children to generate ideas or to argue about the truth or value of what others had written. Teaching from a catechism discourages questioning, interpreting, or reflecting on the significance of what was presented. "Writing" instruction consisted of copying portions of texts written by others—literally, in "copy books." The schools had no interest in recognizing or developing the independent authority of the student's mind, and they placed a great deal of importance on confirming the authority of received texts.

The frame of mind that gave us the catechism is the same frame of mind that gave us the American schools in the Traditional Era—from colonial times until after the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> The dominant aim of traditional education was to develop character and intellect in the young by teaching them long-established knowledge. The curriculum was narrow—reading, penmanship, spelling, arithmetic, plus a little history, English, grammar, and geography. Subjects were divided into small "teachable" parts and taught in rigid order—from easy to hard or according to some logical idea of what must come before what. Each subject was taught in its own time slot. Little attention was paid to common elements or similarities from one subject to the next. Emphasis was on learning facts and rules.

There was no attempt to relate the curriculum to the children's lives. The curriculum was fixed and followed down to the last detail year after year. The same material was given to all pupils, without regard for individual differences. The school day consisted of lectures, drill, memorization, recitation, and examinations. Interaction between pupils was limited to competition. Cooperation in doing lessons was likely to be seen as cheating. The teacher and the textbook were the only source of information. Students not occupied directly with the teacher were expected to keep quiet. Desks faced the teacher and were kept in straight rows. They

were often bolted to the floor. Play was permitted only during recess.

If this all sounds pretty familiar, I'm not surprised. Traditional education has never disappeared, but the worst nightmare versions of it found today pale in comparison to the schools of the Traditional Era. These were the days of the schoolmaster. Before 1830, few women taught school. Women did not become the majority in the teaching profession until 1870.

The concept of educating a person to be a teacher was unheard of during the Traditional Era. People who could read and write set themselves up as schoolmasters. They were sometimes paid by individual parents, but almost from the beginning of the colonial period, some communities provided free schooling to those who wanted it and could take advantage of it. The teacher's continued employment did not depend on whether he had any particular talent for teaching; it depended on whether he could control the students.

Severity was considered a virtue. Teachers used a three-foot ruler and a flexible sapling about five feet in length "with force and frequency" upon both boys and girls, young and old, when they did not know their lessons or broke rules. During an inspection tour of the Boston schools in 1844, board members found that whippings in a "representative" school of four hundred pupils averaged sixty-five a day. They found "severe injuries" sometimes resulted from these beatings and that the offenses were often "very trifling." A famous historian commented that "There was little 'soft pedagogy' in the management of either town or rural schools before the Civil War."<sup>4</sup>

"Spare the rod and spoil the child" was a Bible text that received the most literal acceptance both in theory and practice. Even the naturally mild-tempered man was an "old-fashioned" disciplinarian when it came to teaching, and the naturally rough and coarse-grained man was as frightful as any ogre in a fairy tale.

In summer, unless the teacher was an uncommonly poor one, or some of the scholars uncommonly wild and mischievous, the days moved along very harmoniously and pleasantly. In winter, when the big boys came in, some of them grown men, who cared vastly more about having a good time than getting learning, an important requisite of the master was "government." He ruled his little empire, not with a rod

of iron, but with a stout three-foot ruler, known as a "ferule," which was quite as effective. The really severe teacher had no hesitation in throwing this ruler at any child he saw misbehaving, and it is to be noted that he threw first and spoke afterward. Very likely he would order the culprit to bring him the ferule he had cast at him (it was a common occurrence to see in schoolroom walls "dents made by ferules hurled at misbehaving pupils' heads with an aim that sometimes proved untrue"), and, when the boy came out on the floor, would further punish him. Punishment by spitting the palm of his hand with a ruler was known as "feruling." The smarting of blows was severe while the punishment lasted, but this was as nothing to a "thrashing." The boy to be thrashed was himself sent for the apple tree twigs with which he was to be whipped. Poor fellow! Whimpering, and blinded by the welling tears, he slowly whittles off one after the other of the rough twigs. This task done, he drags his unwilling feet back to the schoolroom.

"Take off your coat, sir," says the master.

The school is hushed into terrified silence. The fire crackles in the wide fireplace, the wind whistles at the eaves, the boy's tears flow faster, and he stammers a plea for mercy. Then the whip hisses through the air, and blows fall thick and fast. The boy dances about the floor, and his shrill screams fill the schoolroom. His mates are frightened and trembling, and the girls are crying. . . .<sup>5</sup>

"Big boys" were often the teacher's nemesis. Two fairly commonplace forms of disruption often cost the teacher his job and caused the school to be closed until another teacher could be found. The first was referred to as "putting out" or "turning out" the teacher. In 1837 more than three hundred schools in Massachusetts were "broken up" by rebellious pupils—and Massachusetts was always a leader in education. The situation was probably worse elsewhere in the country. Turning out the teacher was described by Horace Greeley, of "Go west, young man" fame.

At the close of the morning session of the first of January, and perhaps on some other day that the big boys chose to consider or make a holiday, the moment the master left the house in quest of his dinner, the little ones were started homeward, the doors and windows suddenly and securely barricaded, and the

older pupils, thus fortified against intrusion, proceeded to spend the afternoon in play and hilarity. I have known a master to make a desperate struggle for admission, but the odds were too great. If he appealed to the neighboring fathers, they were apt to advise him to desist, and let matters take their course. I recollect one instance, however, where a youth [the teacher] was shut out who, procuring a piece of board, mounted from a fence to the roof of the schoolhouse and covered the top of the chimney nicely with his board. Ten minutes thereafter, the house was filled with smoke, and its inmates, opening the doors and windows, were glad to make terms with the outsider."<sup>6</sup>

It seems that in the Traditional Period of American education, the schoolmaster needed to earn his wings every day.

Another widely reported problem was assaults upon the teacher. These sometimes resulted when the teacher's thrashing of a student got to such a pitch that the miscreant or others (the older boys again) began to protest. When shouts failed "forcible, if not indeed armed, intervention might be the result."<sup>7</sup> But assaults arose over other matters as well. One benighted soul was reported to have lost his job over a plan to demonstrate his physical prowess that went awry. He challenged several boys to wrestle during recess. "[H]e was downed successively by two or three and soon, as a result, lost control of the school, as they found they could handle him, and so concluded to have their own way."<sup>8</sup> The teacher was fired.

And brutalizing and humiliating students carried with them certain risks. And as we will see, these were not abandoned for purely altruistic reasons.

This was a time when public schools were not expected to include everyone. In 1850 fewer than half the nation's whites between the ages of five and nineteen were in school, and the number of nonwhites in school was negligible. This was before immigration from eastern and southern Europe and the white population was vastly more homogeneous than it is today.

The concept of individual differences was unheard of. If a student failed or dropped out, it was no reflection on the school. The student was thought to be stupid or lazy. In schooling, blaming the victim is not a new concept.

After the Civil War things began to change. Between 1850 and 1900 the population of the United States tripled. Nine percent of the population lived in cities in 1850, 25 percent by 1870, and 50 percent by 1920. With industrialization and urbanization, the extended family of the rural setting gave way to nuclear families living among strangers in an unfamiliar setting. Children who had commonly worked on farms, now worked in factories. But as sentiment against child labor in industry mounted, child labor laws were enacted, and children became unemployable. In Philadelphia in 1870, it was reported that "upward of 20,000 children not attending any school, public, private or parochial, are running the streets in idleness and vagabondism."<sup>9</sup>

Concern over delinquency, workers' fear of competition from cheap child labor, and some genuine regard for the welfare of children prompted a rising demand for compulsory education. Only Massachusetts had compulsory education laws before the Civil War. Vermont was the first state to follow suit, in 1867. By 1919 every state had compulsory education laws. It was now the responsibility of the schools to take in all children and keep them.

Enrollments soared and schools became overcrowded. Playgrounds, which had been all outdoors in the country, were confined, overcrowded areas in cities as the country urbanized. The student body was no longer homogeneous. Students varied in ability, religion, social status, place of birth, and language. Differences among white Americans, who had hailed largely from northwestern Europe before the Civil War, were dwarfed by differences among immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the newly freed African Americans after the Civil War. By 1910 the proportion of students with foreign-born parents topped 50 percent in the nation's thirty-seven largest cities.

With compulsory education, control became the central problem of schools. Older children with no means of escape were even more prone to violent resistance toward the traditional teaching and discipline methods of the past. The assumption that a child who was not ready to recite lessons perfectly was simply lazy and deserving of a thrashing or expulsion no longer worked. Differences in what could be reasonably expected from different students became too apparent to ignore. Finding other means of control became essential.

*Why were teachers becoming teachers?*  
Industrialization offered more promising kinds of employment for educated men than "keeping school." At the same time, with compulsory education, schools were becoming a big ticket item for taxpayers, and women could be paid less than men. By 1870 the majority of teachers were women and by 1920 more than 80 percent of teachers were women. The school staff was becoming more and more female. Simultaneously, or perhaps in response to the impossibility of continuing business as usual, public attitudes toward brutal treatment of children were changing and prohibitions against corporal punishment were written into most school districts' rules. Something had to happen, and it did. "Progressive" ideals were invoked, but ultimately subverted, to calm the troubled waters.

The ideas upon which progressive education is built can be traced to the seventeenth century and the period referred to as the Enlightenment. Until this time the prevailing view was that human beings are inherently sinful. Enlightenment philosophers argued that man is not inherently good or evil; only his environment makes him one or the other, and so if you could make the environment consistently favorable, there would be no limits on the achievement and virtue of which individuals were capable.

Rousseau (1712-1778) applied this idea explicitly to childhood. He believed that children are endowed with potentials that should be nurtured and permitted to grow naturally in a healthy environment. Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and Froebel (1782-1852) took Rousseau's ideas and translated them into practice in elementary schools and in kindergarten. These ideas found their way to the United States as early as 1808, in a book by Joseph Neef, and an influential champion in Horace Mann (1796-1859).

In an 1843 report to the Massachusetts Board of Education, Mann criticized the schools and called for reforms, including methods based on Rousseau's ideas and discipline based on love. Mann was immediately attacked by ministers who opposed his educational beliefs. The controversy succeeded in drawing widespread attention to Mann's ideas.

In the 1890s Joseph Rice toured schools in thirty-five cities and wrote a series of muckraking articles that attacked methods of



teaching that were designed to "immobilize, automate, and dehumanize students." Lawrence Cremin, a distinguished educational historian, credits Rice's articles with starting the progressive movement in the United States.<sup>10</sup> About the same time, John Dewey (1869-1953), probably the best-known proponent of "progressive education," started the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago.

There are two central concepts of progressive education. First, schools should deal with the whole child—his or her personality, social skills and attitudes, and physical well-being—rather than focusing exclusively on his or her ability to master a narrow, traditional curriculum and parrot back answers. Therefore, education should be interesting, exciting, and enjoyable. Second, children are different. They have different experiences, abilities, and interests. Therefore, although the knowledge and skills included in a progressive curriculum might be quite traditional, they are not likely to be taught in a rigid order dictated by some concept of easy-to-hard or the logic of the subject. They are instead taught in an order dictated by the experiences, abilities, and interests of the individual children. Children are given some choice in determining what they will study and even in how they will go about learning.

Because progressive schools deal with the development of the whole child and recognize individual differences in students' experiences, abilities, and interests, traditional school activities such as reading, writing, and reciting are joined by expressive, creative, physical, and social activities. Art, music, crafts, shop, cooking, sewing, dramatics, and physical education all become part of the regular curriculum. Subjects are "integrated" whenever possible. For example, reading, writing, geography, history, and arithmetic lessons might be incorporated into an ongoing project determined by the students, such as studying the origins of ethnic groups represented in the classroom. Children's activities and learnings will vary. Courses of study (in history, for example) are viewed, not as something that must be covered by each child in a fixed and thorough manner, but as guides for facts, concepts, skills, understandings, and attitudes that might be developed as the teacher deems appropriate for the class and for individual students.

The teacher and textbook are no longer the sole sources of knowledge. Pupils go on field trips, utilize the library and audio-

visual presentations, interview local citizens, and so on. Memorization and drill are replaced with efforts to lead students to discover general principles. Pupils are permitted to work independently and in small groups, move about the room, and engage in interesting projects, and a variety of methods and materials are used, including plays, murals, models, projects, games, audio-visual equipment, computers, and field trips.

When children do not do their lessons or don't do them correctly, teachers question whether students have the necessary background or previous knowledge, or they question their own methods or consider how they might capture the students' interest before deciding that the students are lazy or stupid. When, at last, punishment appears to be necessary, it is not physical; instead, it usually involves the loss of some sort of privilege and it is accompanied with sympathetic and constructive suggestions for behavioral changes and explanations of why they are necessary. The ideal is not discipline from above, but self-discipline. Willinsky defines "new literacy," a recent form of progressive education, as "those strategies in the teaching of reading and writing which attempt to shift the control of literacy from the teacher to the student."<sup>11</sup>

Teachers strive to be democratic and friendly. The classroom is informal. Desk and chairs are movable and they are frequently rearranged into circles, clusters, or lines depending on the activity. Distinctions between the school and other spheres of the students' life are minimized. Schools attempt to build on home and community activities with which children are already familiar. But, as we shall see, progressives had fairly upscale homes and communities in mind.

Progressive education unintentionally offered the school an escape hatch from the crisis precipitated by compulsory education laws. Invoking principles of progressive education, schools were able to continue teaching the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic in grades one through six, but there were now *flexible standards*. Less could be expected (and less demanded) of some students based on their "aptitude" or "intelligence." Everyone in the fourth grade class would move on to the fifth even though there might be a wide range of achievement among them. As early as seventh

defn. of progressive education

grade the curriculum would be diversified by adding such courses as shop, art, music, cooking, sewing, and auto mechanics.

The adoption of flexible standards and a diversified curriculum dovetailed with the growing testing movement and created a new profession—school counselling. Intelligence and achievement tests were used to assign students to “tracks” or “streams.” An elementary school with sixty or seventy students in each grade might divide them into “low,” “middle,” and “high” classes, often based on their scores on standardized reading achievement tests. High schools developed academic, commercial, and vocational programs, which, despite protestation to the contrary, soon became identified as “high” and “low” tracks in the minds of everyone. Where schools during the Traditional Era selected students by a process of exclusion, schools in the Progressive Era selected students by differentiating them into different tracks or streams.

There are those who argue that the adoption of progressive ideas was the result of convincing philosophical arguments from scholars such as Dewey. There is no doubt some truth to this, but I generally favor the “escape hatch” theory, because after the dust settled we had arrived at the present system, which is pretty well described by Anyon’s study of gentry, middle-class, and working-class schools reported in the last chapter.

Anyon’s affluent professional school is about as good as it gets in terms of progressive philosophy and methods and her executive elite school had a progressive feel about it in terms of discipline, student autonomy, and teachers’ attitudes toward the students. I would describe her middle-class and working-class schools as traditional schools with a “softened pedagogy,” ones where lessons are a little less rigid, but not much, and the brutal assaults have all but disappeared.

I would estimate that today about 20 percent of American schools, those attended by the offspring of the gentry, those whom Reich describes as symbolic-analytic workers, could be described as progressive. The remaining 80 percent, those attended by the offspring of the middle and working classes, are best described as traditional schools with a somewhat softened pedagogy. And I would

*Why is this?*

expect the degree of “softening” to be related to the status of the parents—the higher the status, the softer the pedagogy.

But why aren’t progressive methods, curriculum, and philosophy used in all schools? There is not a single reason. There are a lot of them. They’re subtle and interconnected. I’ll discuss them in the next several chapters.